

SURVIVORS

by LAURA BARNETT

There he is, then, on the doorstep: her ex-husband. Joe.

Fifty-seven now, or is it fifty-eight? His hair still dark and thick, his expression still determinedly charming. But today, his dazzle is a little dimmed: his skin is greyish, his eyes

pink-seamed. Isabel can see that he has been crying, and the thought moves her more than she can trust herself to express.

"Izzy." He throws open his arms. Grey cashmere coat, black turtleneck, blue jeans; champagne in one hand, whisky in the other. The lights blinking in the box hedge behind him, and the street empty, hushed.

"Joe." Isabel does not embrace him, but reaches out a hand to catch the sleeve of his coat. "Welcome. Happy Christmas. Come in."

She'd been ambushed, really, by the children.

Her birthday, back in November: Sophie, up from London; Theo, down from Exeter. Martin had cooked a lamb tagine, and they'd eaten at the dining-room table that Isabel would, on Christmas morning a month later, set for twelve, arranging the crackers and the glassware and the silver candelabra with its layered patina of wax and dust.

"Angela's left Dad," Sophie had told her over the birthday cake. "He's a mess. He hasn't left the house in a week."

Then Theo: "We wondered whether it might be all right to invite Dad for Christmas. We don't think he should be alone."

Isabel had sipped her coffee, and an image had slipped into her mind. The first Christmas she had spent without Joe, without the children. Rising early in her mother's house; opening the children's stockings in the room that had once been hers, and then buttoning them into their coats. Joe framed in the doorway, not wishing to come in. It had not felt like Christmas. It had not felt like her life.

Martin, eventually, had broken the silence. "What do you think, Isabel? I certainly wouldn't mind."

Three faces, watching hers.

Sophie and Theo - her children, grown now, of course, but still carrying the hazy after-images of their younger selves. Huddled together on the sofa all those years before, as Joe packed his bags; asking her, in an unending chorus of complaint, where Daddy was going, and when he would be coming back.

Martin - her dear one, her second chance.

Of course she could not refuse. She had been divorced from Joe for almost twenty years. And he was suffering, it seemed. There was, perhaps, a certain poetic justice in this, but she would not linger on that now.

"All right," Isabel said. "Yes, invite your dad. What's another mouth to feed?"

Sophie and Theo exchanged a look.

"That's great, Mum," Sophie said. "I'll give Dad a call. It'll mean a lot to him. It'll mean a lot to us."

Now, Isabel ushers Joe into the house. She takes his coat, his bottles; shows him into the living-room, where Martin and Sophie are opening champagne.

Here, the usual convivial chaos. The grandchildren, high on chocolate and brand-new toys, chasing each other around the room; their mother, Martin's daughter Iris, following behind. Sophie's girlfriend - one day, perhaps, to be Isabel's daughter-in-law - draped painfully across the sofa with a glass of Alka-Seltzer.

Martin's brother James - ten years, now, since his own divorce, and still he has that same defeated, slump-shouldered air - discussing US foreign policy with Theo. Isabel's mother, Eleanor, standing rod-backed in her pearls beside the mantelpiece with Hugh from number twelve, whom she still refuses to call her boyfriend. Martin, Isabel's second husband - though she does not think of him as her second anything - moving around the room, filling everyone's glasses for the toast.

Martin reaches Joe last. "Merry Christmas," he says, and then, addressing the crowd, "To family and friends, both old and new."

"To family and friends," the echo comes.

How strange it is, Isabel thinks as she lift her glass, *this happy gathering*. All of them - this fragmented, reconstituted group she calls her family - standing in her living-room on Christmas Day.

She looks from face to face; lingers, lastly, on Joe, who offers her another weak, low-wattage smile.

"Thank you," he mouths, and she sends him back, silently, "You're welcome."

Joe had never liked Christmas. Isabel had found this intriguing at first, along with his other idiosyncrasies - his refusal to learn to drive; his egotism (she'd believed for so long that this was only an affectation); his insistence on living on that hideous old boat, with its shudders and leaks and lingering smells of paint and engine-oil.

And then, gradually, the joy Isabel herself had always taken in Christmas - the gifts; the tree; that lovely, warm, sated feeling - had turned Joe from a brave iconoclast into a miserable Scrooge.

"A gluttonous pageant of unbridled capitalist greed," he'd pronounced one year. Isabel had suggested, if Joe felt so strongly, that he spend the day on his own; and that, in the end, was what he had done - though a year or so later, she'd been forced to acknowledge that he had almost certainly not been alone. He must have spent the day with Gemma, who would soon become his second wife. Gemma had probably cooked him a goose, or a side of beef; Joe had probably pretended to enjoy it. He'd become adept, by then, at pretending.

"Can I do anything?" Joe says now.

He is standing beside her in the kitchen with a tumbler of whisky. Isabel observes him through a fragrant fug of heat: the turkey is resting, the potatoes sizzling in goose fat, the sprouts about to go in to steam.

"Thanks," she says, "but I'm better left alone."

Joe doesn't move. Isabel turns on the gas under the sprouts, reaches for the packet of cooked chestnuts and begins slicing, each movement fluid, sure.

"Do you remember that bloody awful Christmas, before Sophie was born? The one when the oven broke, and we tried to cook the turkey crown in the microwave?"

"Yes, Joe. I do."

The turkey had been disgusting, of course - inedible. They'd ended up heating a can of baked beans, and then spending the rest of the day in bed. A silence falls between them now, and Isabel wonders whether Joe's memory of that lovemaking - passionate, languid, slow - is as suddenly, spectacularly intense as hers. She keeps slicing.

"I suppose the kids have told you what happened with Angela."

She reaches for the packet of bacon. "Yes. I'm sorry."

He makes an odd, strangulated noise, somewhere between a sigh and a sob. "God, Izzy. It just came so out of the blue. I mean, we were talking about *children* - Angela had decided she wanted them after all - and then I get home and find she's packing her bags. Some man she met at the gym."

Isabel draws her knife through the bacon rashers. "Really, Joe. It's awful. There's nothing worse."

"You'd know, of course, wouldn't you?" His voice has altered, turned whiny, boyish. She remembers, now, how Joe would do this to seek sympathy, and how thoroughly it would invoke in her the opposite response. "I'm sure you think this is no more than I deserve."

She sighs. "Joe. It's Christmas. I'm cooking. Can we please leave this for some other time? Like never?"

Another lengthy silence. The faint strains of carols from the living-room; the clamour of pots and pans; a cheer rising from the garden, where Martin is kicking a ball around with the grandchildren.

"Jesus, Izzy, I'm sorry," Joe says. "I know I'm a miserable old man, and there's nothing more boring than that. It just hurts, you know? It really, really hurts."

"I know it does." And then, quite suddenly, Isabel turns to Joe, and places a hand, just for a second, to his cheek. "You'll be all right. You really will. You'll get through this."

"Like you did." He is almost whispering now. "Like you had to."

She turns away. "Yes. Like I had to, and Sophie and Theo too. Now let me get this lunch finished, or we'll *all* be eating baked beans."

After pudding, Cam and Sophie suggest they play charades.

Iris demurs - she'll take the children upstairs, lay out their new train-set - but the others are persuaded. Martin refreshes wine-glasses, sets out dishes of nuts and olives. Isabel leaves the living-room curtains undrawn: outside, the evening is coming on, and the lights in the hedge are fractured by a misty sheen of rain.

Sophie is up first, then Cam; then it is Joe's turn. Isabel sits beside Martin, hand linked in his, as her ex-husband takes his place in the centre of the room. Joe thinks for a moment, then lifts a hand to his ear. *First word... Sounds like...*

Martin's gaze, resting on Joe, is relaxed, with no hint of jealousy or mistrust; and why would there be, after all these years? And yet, Isabel can't truly say that nothing remains between her and Joe; that all that was once there between them has simply disappeared. They are not strangers, and they are not friends: what are they, then? *Survivors*, she thinks, sipping her wine. *Each carrying our battle scars.*

"All right, Mum?" Theo, leaning down to kiss her on the cheek.

She smiles. "Yes, I'm all right, darling. Really. Thanks."

Eleanor has just stood up for her turn when the doorbell rings.

Martin rises to his feet. "I'll go. Pete and Jane did say they might pop in for a drink."

Isabel watches her husband as he leaves the room. Martin has filled out in the last year or two, and his hair - what's left of it - is now entirely grey. He is only a few years older than Joe, but the comparison is stark. *Joe must work out*, she thinks. *Probably Angela's doing*. And she feels a rush of love for Martin, and gratitude for the man her husband is: gentle, tender, stubborn, true.

She remembers the night Joe left, how she'd fallen to the floor of that godforsaken boat and sobbed until the children, alarmed, had come running from their beds. If that woman, that younger Isabel, could have known that this man, Martin - and this marriage, and this home - would one day be hers, how much pain they would all have been spared. But she could never have possessed such knowledge, of course; just as Joe, back then, could never have imagined that he would one day find himself here, a guest in his ex-wife's house on Christmas Day.

From the hallway comes the faint, singsong melody of a woman's voice, and Martin's low, unintelligible response. After a moment, Martin reappears at the door.

"Joe," he says, "I think you'd better come out here."

Isabel follows Joe to the hallway. A woman is standing on the doorstep: long auburn hair; a fine-boned, intelligent face; a black padded coat and vivid yellow scarf.

"Angela," Joe says.

The woman looks up, meets Joe's eyes with hers; then shifts her gaze beyond him, to Isabel.

"I'm so sorry," she says. "I hate to barge in on you like this, I really do. Today of all days. But I was hoping to see Joe. That is, if he doesn't mind. And if you don't mind, of course."

Joe stands still, eyes fixed on Angela, blocking Isabel's exit. Behind her, the living-room has fallen silent; she can hear only the faint sounds of the grandchildren playing upstairs, and a car revving up in the street outside.

Isabel looks to Martin. He smiles, offers her the tiniest, most discreet of shrugs, and she feels suddenly light - dizzy, almost, with the absurdity of it all. Of all that it means to be human: frail and mutable; hurting each other, loving each other, surviving. She feels she could laugh out loud, and so she does, and the sound of her laughter - high, full, shimmering - rolls out across the tiled floor of the hallway to the door, where her ex-husband's third wife is waiting, staring at her, wondering what on earth is happening.

"Angela," Isabel says. "Why don't you come in?"

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